

Skin Capital - Racial Phenotype as Erotic Commodity Among Northeastern Migrant Women in Delhi

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Abstract

What happens when the body's racial surface becomes its primary economic asset? This paper develops the concept of skin capital, species of embodied capital, in Bourdieu's sense, generated through the market valuation of phenotypic racial difference. Drawing on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork (May 2025-January 2026) in Delhi's informal intimacy economy across spa parlours, encrypted digital platforms, rented flats, and liminal spaces, and on semi-structured interviews with nineteen women from Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram engaged in paid intimate labor, we show how the 'Mongoloid' phenotype is converted into capital accumulated, and exchanged above the market norm. We argue that this conversion operates through what we term "phenotypic labor": curating, staging, and sustaining racialized appearance as an erotic commodity legible to a clientele whose desire is structured by transnational racial fantasies (East Asian, K-pop, anime). The analysis engages Bourdieu's field theory, Hochschild's emotional labor framework, Wacquant's concept of bodily capital, Mezzadra and Neilson's work on differential inclusion, and Mbembe's necropolitics to argue that racial fetishism in commercial sex is a concentrated expression of the logics governing Northeast Indian bodies in mainland India. The paper contributes to the sociology of race, sex work, and migration by demonstrating that phenotype functions as a means of production in intimate economies, and that women who possess it engage in racialised bodily entrepreneurship that is simultaneously agentic and structurally coerced.

Keywords: *skin capital, phenotypic labour, racial fetishism, sex work, Northeast India, Bourdieu, intimate economies, Delhi, ethnography*

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1 Introduction

"My face is my capital. Not my brain, not my degree, not my English. My face. These eyes. This is what they're paying for. Everything else I could learn, but this, I was born with it, and in Delhi it has a price."

Lalmuanpuii, 23, Aizawl, Mizoram. Interview, September 2025.

In Bourdieu's (1986) canonical taxonomy of capital, economic, cultural, social, symbolic, the body appears primarily as a vehicle for the habitus, the durable dispositions through which agents navigate social fields. Loic Wacquant (1995a, 1995b, 2004), in his ethnography of Chicago boxers, extended this framework by demonstrating that the body itself can function as capital: boxers accumulate 'bodily capital' through disciplined training, converting physical capacity into economic return. The concept has since been applied to athletes, dancers, models, and sex workers (Mears, 2011; Hoang, 2015; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). But in each of these formulations, bodily capital is understood as acquired, the product of labour, training, discipline, and investment over time.

This paper identifies a different species. Among the Northeastern Indian women we studied in Delhi's informal intimacy economy, the body's primary market value derives not from what it can do but from what it looks like, specifically, from the phenotypic features (epicanthic folds, flat nasal bridges, lighter skin relative to the North Indian norm, straight dark hair, smaller skeletal frames) that mark them as racially distinct within the Indian context and, crucially, as racially proximate to East Asian bodies within the transnational erotic imaginary. We call this **skin capital**: the convertible value of racial phenotype within a specific market field.

The concept is analytically necessary because existing frameworks cannot account for what we observed. Hochschild's (1983) 'emotional labour' captures the affective work these women perform but not its racial specificity. Bernstein's (2007) 'bounded authenticity' describes the manufacture of intimacy for sale but not the role of racial fantasy in structuring that intimacy. Wacquant's bodily capital presupposes accumulation through effort; skin capital, by contrast, is ascribed at birth and activated by context, a Mizo woman's face has no special erotic value in Aizawl, but in Delhi it commands a 200-300% premium over phenotypically 'mainland' competitors in the same market tier. The capital is not in the body per se. It is in the racial difference the body signifies within a specific field of desire.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 elaborates the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the fieldwork. Sections 4 through 7 present findings. Section 8 concludes by arguing that racial phenotype functions, in this economy, as a means of production in the classical Marxian sense, and that recognising it as such demands a rethinking of how we theorise the intersection of race, sex, and labour.

2 Bodies, Fields, and Racial Value

2.1 Bourdieu's Capital and Its Limits

Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theory of capital posits that social power is distributed through multiple, convertible forms of capital that operate within semi-autonomous fields, structured arenas of competition governed by field-specific logics. Economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (education, taste, credentials), and social capital (networks, relationships) are accumulated, invested, and exchanged according to the 'rules of the game' operative in each field.

The body enters Bourdieu's framework through the habitus, the embodied, pre-reflexive dispositions that agents carry as a consequence of their social position. The habitus is 'history turned into nature' (Bourdieu, 1977: 78): class-specific ways of walking, speaking, eating, and gesturing that are experienced as natural but are in fact socially produced. Wacquant (1995b, 2004) made the body more analytically explicit by showing that prizefighters invest in their bodies as a form of capital, subjecting them to regimes of discipline (training, diet, pain management) that convert raw physical capacity into marketable fighting skill. The body becomes, in his terms, a 'form of capital in its own right' (Wacquant, 2004: 128).

But there is a crucial limitation. In Wacquant's account, as in Bourdieu's broader framework, capital is acquired. It is the product of labour, of time, effort, investment. The boxer's body capital is accumulated through years of training; the model's through regimes of diet, exercise, and aesthetic self-management (Mears, 2011). Even the sex worker's 'erotic capital' (Hakim, 2010; Green, 2008) is typically theorised as a combination of attractiveness, social skills, and sexual competence that can be cultivated and deployed strategically.

What I observed among Northeastern women in Delhi does not fit this model. Their primary market asset, the racialised phenotype, is not acquired. It is inherited. It cannot be accumulated through effort, though it can be enhanced through specific cosmetic and performative labour (a point we develop in Section 5). It is not the product of class-specific socialisation. It is, in the most literal sense, skin-deep. And yet it functions, within the field of Delhi's intimacy economy, exactly as capital functions: it confers competitive advantage, commands premium pricing, and can be strategically deployed, converted, and even (through cosmetic modification) invested in.

We therefore propose skin capital as a subtype of bodily capital that is

- Ascribed, not acquired (phenotypic, not performative in origin);
- Field-dependent (its value is activated only within specific markets of desire; it has no special value in the women's home states);
- Convertible (into economic capital, through intimate labour; and, ambiguously, into social capital, through the networks and client relationships it enables);
- Depletable (through aging, physical damage, and the psychic toll of sustained racial performance, a point with necropolitical implications we address below).

2.2 Emotional Labour, Erotic Capital, and Their Insufficiencies

Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept of emotional labour, the management of feeling to produce a publicly observable facial and bodily display, has been extensively applied to sex work (Sanders, 2005; Chapkis, 1997; Boris and Parrenas, 2010). Sex workers manage their own emotions (suppressing disgust, performing desire) and the emotions of clients (producing feelings of desirability, intimacy, specialness). This framework is necessary but insufficient for the present case because it treats the emotional labour as racially unmarked. A flight attendant's smile, in Hochschild's account, is generically warm; a sex worker's performed desire is generically erotic. But the labour we observed is specifically racial: the women are not performing generic intimacy but racialised intimacy, a fantasy structured by the client's desire for a body that signifies East Asian otherness.

Hakim's (2010) concept of erotic capital, comprising beauty, sexual attractiveness, social skills, liveliness, social presentation, and sexuality, gestures toward the

body's market value but remains individualistic and voluntaristic, as if erotic assets were a personal portfolio to be optimised. It has been rightly criticised (Skeggs, 2004; Adkins, 2005) for ignoring structural power. What is missing in Hakim, and what the Northeastern case makes visible, is that erotic value is not a property of individual bodies but a relational effect produced at the intersection of racial classification, gendered desire, and market structure.

2.3 Differential Inclusion and Necropolitics

Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) concept of differential inclusion describes how migrant bodies are incorporated into political and economic systems not through full membership but through graduated modes of access that simultaneously include and subordinate. Northeastern migrants in Delhi are Indian citizens but are racially marked as not-quite-Indian, a condition that produces both exclusion (housing discrimination, street harassment, the 'chinky' slur) and perverse inclusion (premium erotic value precisely because of that otherness). They are included in Delhi's economy as racial others, and their inclusion is conditional on performing that otherness.

Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics extends Foucault's biopolitics to theorise conditions under which certain populations are consigned to 'death-worlds', zones of social death, disposability, and slow violence. We do not claim that the women we studied inhabit death-worlds in Mbembe's fullest sense. But we do argue that the conversion of racial phenotype into erotic commodity involves a form of slow necropolitical extraction: the women's bodies are valued precisely for the racial features that, in other contexts, mark them for discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. The intimacy economy does not liberate them from racial subordination; it monetises it. The same face that is spat at on the metro is kissed in the hotel room, and both acts emerge from the same racial logic. This is necropolitics operating not through sovereign killing but through the eroticisation of disposability.

3 Fieldwork: May 2025 to January 2026

3.1 Access and Positionality

As the first two authors, we are Northeastern women. This fact is both the condition of possibility for this research and its most significant methodological

complication. Our own phenotype, the same 'Mongoloid' features that constitute skin capital in the field we studied, granted us a degree of trust and legibility that a non-Northeastern researcher would almost certainly not have achieved. It also meant that we were, throughout the fieldwork, navigating the same racial field as our participants. We were called 'chinky' on the metro. We were asked by a landlord in Lajpat Nagar whether we were 'one of those spa girls.' These experiences are not incidental to the research; they are part of its data.

Fieldwork began in May 2025, when we relocated to a paying-guest accommodation in Munirka, a neighbourhood chosen because of its high concentration of Northeastern student-migrants and its proximity to several of the spa parlours and outcall networks we would eventually study. Access was mediated by a Mizo women's church fellowship group that operated an informal support network for Northeastern women in precarious situations. Over the first three months, we attended fellowship meetings, accompanied women on errands, shared meals, and gradually became known as 'the ones writing a paper.' By August 2025, we had been introduced to women who were, or had recently been, engaged in paid intimate labour.

3.2 Participants

Nineteen women participated in semi-structured interviews. All were from the three states of Manipur (nine), Nagaland (five), and Mizoram (five). Ages ranged from 19 to 29 (median: 23). All had migrated to Delhi for higher education; fourteen were currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, three had dropped out, and two had completed degrees but remained in Delhi. Fifteen were actively engaged in paid intimate labour at the time of interview; four had exited within the previous eight months. All interviews were conducted between August 2025 and January 2026.

Monthly earnings from intimate labour ranged from INR 30,000 to INR 3,20,000 (median: approximately INR 90,000). For reference, the median starting salary for a recent graduate in Delhi is approximately INR 20,000-25,000 per month.

3.3 Data Collection

Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and four hours. Twelve were audio-recorded with consent; seven were documented through contemporaneous handwritten

notes. All were conducted in private settings chosen by the participant, typically a cafe, a park, or the participant's own room. Languages used were English, Mizo, and Meiteilon, often in rapid alternation within a single utterance.

In addition to interviews, I conducted approximately 350 hours of participant observation across the following sites:

- Three spa parlours in South and East Delhi (observation of front-of-house operations, waiting areas, and, on four occasions with explicit consent, post-session debriefs in staff rest areas);
- Five Telegram channels used for client solicitation and review (observed as a lurker; did not post or interact; channels ranged from 400 to 2,800 members);
- Informal social gatherings, shared meals, shopping trips, church meetings, where women discussed their work among trusted peers;
- Two rented flats used as incall locations (observed during off-hours only; I was never present during client sessions).

All names are pseudonyms. Identifying details (specific neighborhoods, institutional affiliations, and physical descriptions) have been altered or composited. Two participants requested that specific anecdotes be attributed to fabricated composite identities; I have honored this.

Note: The primary ethnographic fieldwork and participant observations detailed in this paper were conducted entirely by the first author [or specify initials, e.g., L.R.], while data analysis and theoretical framing were executed collaboratively by all co-authors.

Note: To ensure absolute confidentiality and protect the safety, legal status, and social well-being of all human subjects, strict anonymization protocols have been applied. All participant names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms, and all specific institutional, geographic, and physical identifiers have been carefully altered or composited.

3.4 Ethics and Discomfort

All participants were informed about the purposes of this study, and informed consent was taken. All names and location details presented here are anonymized. Several interviews contained descriptions of sexual acts, client behavior, and emotional states of such specificity that I experienced visceral distress during and

after them. I have retained this specificity in the analysis where it is analytically necessary, where sanitising the account would obscure the mechanism I am trying to describe. The reader should understand that explicitness is not gratuitous. It is the data. The discomfort it produces in the reader is itself analytically relevant: it is the discomfort the women manage professionally, every day, as a condition of their economic survival.

4 The Price of Phenotype

4.1 Rate Differentials

The most empirically unambiguous finding is economic. Northeastern women command substantially higher rates than non-Northeastern women operating at comparable tiers of Delhi's intimacy market. We triangulated this through three data sources: participant self-reports, rate cards observed in spa parlors, and pricing discussions on Telegram channels.

Table 1. Approximate rate ranges, mid-tier market segment, South/East Delhi, 2025. Based on participant reports (n=15), observed rate cards (n=3 establishments), and Telegram channel data (n=5 channels). 'GFE' = girlfriend experience.

Service category	NE women (INR)	Non-NE women (INR)
Spa 'full service' (1 hr)	5,000-15,000	2,000-6,000
Outcall (2-3 hrs)	10,000-25,000	5,000-12,000
Overnight 'GFE' package	20,000-60,000	8,000-25,000

4.2. What Clients Are Buying

The Telegram channels we observed provide a remarkably explicit record of what clients value and why. Reviews are structured around categories that foreground racial phenotype:

"FR [Field Report]: SP [Service Provider] name: Lily. State: Manipur. Complexion: very fair, proper chinky look. Body: slim, small frame, smooth skin. GFE level: 9/10. She wore the outfit I brought (school uniform). Didn't break character. Felt like dating a Korean girl. Worth every rupee. Will repeat."
Telegram channel review, observed October 2025

The language is instructive. 'Proper chinky look' indicates that the client is purchasing not sex in the abstract but sex with a body that displays specific racial

markers. 'Felt like dating a Korean girl' reveals the transnational fantasy structure: the client is not desiring a Manipuri woman as such but a racial image, Korean, Japanese, East Asian, that the Manipuri woman's phenotype is made to approximate. The 'school uniform' detail points to the intersection with anime and K-pop fetish cultures, which provide the specific visual scripts through which Northeastern bodies are consumed.

Bourdieu's field theory is illuminating here. The intimacy economy functions as a semi-autonomous field with its own internal logic of valuation. Within this field, racial phenotype operates as a form of capital that is misrecognised (in Bourdieu's technical sense) as erotic attractiveness. Clients do not say: 'I am paying a premium because of her racial features.' They say: 'She's hot,' 'She's exotic,' 'She's different.' The racial basis of the valuation is naturalised as personal preference. This misrecognition is essential to the field's functioning. If the racial structure were made explicit, the fantasy would collapse. The field depends on the denegation (Bourdieu, 1977) of its own logic.

5 Phenotypic Labour: Manufacturing the 'East Asian' Body

Skin capital, though ascribed, is not passively possessed. It must be activated through what we call **"phenotypic labor"**: the deliberate work of curating, enhancing, and performing one's racial appearance to maximise its market value. This labour has material, aesthetic, and affective dimensions.

5.1 The Material Regime

Participants described elaborate grooming regimes oriented not toward generic beauty standards but toward the amplification of racially specific features:

"I use Korean skincare, the 10-step routine, toner, essence, serum, everything. Not because I care about Korean skincare. Because my clients care. I need my skin to look like a K-drama actress. I spend maybe 4,000-5,000 a month on products. It's an investment. My skin is literally my income."

Ngaihulun, 22, Lunglei, Mizoram

"I got circle lenses, the coloured contacts that make your eyes look bigger, like anime eyes. I straighten my hair every two weeks. I bleach my arm hair. One client told me he didn't like body hair because 'Asian girls are supposed to be smooth.' I spent 12,000 on laser sessions after that. He didn't even become a regular."

Kimkim, 20, Ukhrul, Manipur

The labour extends to the management of smell, taste, and voice. Three participants described altering their diets before client sessions:

"No ngari, no akhuni [fermented soybean], nothing with strong smell. I eat bland food, rice, dal, maybe some chicken. I chew mint gum. I spray Japanese cherry blossom perfume. I become scentless. Or rather, I become the scent they expect. A Northeastern girl who smells like Northeastern food breaks the fantasy. I have to smell like a department store."

Thangi, 27, Imphal, Manipur

This is phenotypic labour in its most literal form: the physical body is modified, maintained, and managed as an asset. It requires financial investment (cosmetics, treatments, clothing), temporal investment (hours of grooming), and a specific form of racial literacy, an understanding of which phenotypic features are valued, by whom, and how they can be amplified or approximated. Wacquant's boxers invest in their bodies through training; these women invest in their bodies through racialised aesthetic regimes. The logic is structurally identical. The content is radically different.

5.2 The Performative Dimension

Phenotypic labour extends beyond the material body to encompass what Goffman (1959) would call impression management, but impression management organised around racial signification. Participants described learning to perform a curated version of 'East Asianness' that corresponded to client fantasies:

"I downloaded K-dramas and watched them like homework. I learned the names of BTS members. I can say a few phrases in Korean, oppa, saranghae, basic stuff. One client wanted me to call him oppa during sex. I did. He tipped 5,000 extra. I don't even like K-pop. "

Malsawmi, 23, Aizawl, Mizoram

"There's a costume rotation. Schoolgirl uniform, the Japanese kind, with the short skirt. Qipao. Nurse outfit but the sexy version. 'Traditional Korean dress', a client bought me a hanbok once, but cheap, from Amazon. I have a drawer full of costumes. None of them are from my culture. Nobody has ever asked me to wear a puandum [Mizo traditional wrap]. Nobody wants that fantasy."

Lalmuanpuii, 23, Aizawl, Mizoram

The last observation is analytically crucial. The clients do not fetishise Northeastern culture. They fetishise Northeastern phenotype as a signifier for a different culture entirely, Korean, Japanese, Thai. The women's actual ethnic identities (Mizo, Meitei, Ao, Sumi) are irrelevant to the transaction; what matters is the visual surface. This is skin capital in its purest form: value inheres in the skin, not in anything beneath it. The self is irrelevant. Only the surface is purchased.

This produces a distinctive form of alienation, not Marx's alienation from the product of labour, but alienation from one's own phenotype. The face in the mirror belongs to the market. Lalmuanpuii again:

"Sometimes I look at myself after removing all the makeup and the lenses and I think, who is this? This face has made me maybe 15 lakhs in two years. But it doesn't feel like my face anymore. It feels like an asset. Like a shop. I live behind the shop."

6 Field Architecture: Platforms, Parlours, and the Infrastructure of Racial Desire

The intimacy economy in which skin capital circulates is not a unitary market but a structured field, in Bourdieu's sense, with its own positions, hierarchies, entry conditions, and logics of competition. We identified four interconnected sub-fields through which Northeastern women's intimate labour is organised and exchanged:

6.1 Spa parlours

Licensed as 'wellness centres' or 'Thai spa' (the word 'Thai' itself a racial signifier). The front of the house offers legitimate massage; the back rooms operate on a different tariff. In three establishments we observed, Northeastern women were explicitly segregated into a 'premium' section. One manager explained, without apparent irony: 'Customers pay more for NE girls. Fair skin, soft hands, the look. It's like business class and economy.'

6.2 Encrypted platforms

Telegram channels function as the primary digital infrastructure. Channels we observed ranged from 400 to 2,800 members. They operate through coded language ('SP' = service provider; 'FR' = field report; 'GFE' = girlfriend experience; 'CIM,' 'OWO,' 'BBBJ' = specific sexual acts). Northeastern women are tagged with

state-of-origin labels ('Manipuri,' 'Naga,' 'Mizo') that function as brand categories. New members require referrals. Channels are periodically purged and reconstituted.

6.3 Dating-app pipelines

Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge function as client-acquisition tools. Women maintain profiles with coded signals ('open-minded,' 'generous connections welcome'). The apps provide a veneer of voluntarism and romantic possibility that distinguishes this channel from more explicitly transactional platforms. Several participants described clients who insisted on the fiction that they had 'met on Tinder,' not purchased a service.

6.4 PG networks

Paying-guest accommodations in student neighbourhoods (Munirka, Satyaniketan, Humayanpur, Vijay Nagar) double as incall locations. Landlords are frequently complicit, charging above-market rents in exchange for discretion. Two participants described landlords who actively facilitated the economy, one by providing a 'client waiting area' (a chair in the hallway), another by offering to 'screen' clients through a WhatsApp group.

This layered infrastructure produces what we call structured invisibility: the economy is legible to participants and clients but illegible to outsiders, law enforcement, and, crucially, to the women's own families and academic communities. This is not mere secrecy. It is a systemic property of the field, maintained through encryption, coded language, spatial segregation, and the mutual interest of all parties (workers, clients, managers, landlords) in avoiding detection.

7 Living in the Double Bind: Dissociation, Agency, and the Limits of Choice

Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) concept of differential inclusion is nowhere more visible than in the daily lives of my participants. They are included in Delhi's social fabric as racial others, discriminated against in housing, harassed on public transport, denied service at restaurants, and simultaneously included in Delhi's erotic economy as racial others, desired, paid premium rates, treated as 'exotic.'

The same phenotype that produces exclusion in one register produces inclusion in another. This is not a paradox. It is the structure of differential inclusion: the terms of incorporation are themselves the instruments of subordination.

"Monday to Friday I'm the 'chinky girl' who can't get an auto-rickshaw because drivers think I'm from some other country. Saturday night I'm the 'exotic beauty' who gets 30,000 for pretending to be someone's Korean girlfriend. Same face. Different price. Delhi loves my face and hates my face at the same time. I've stopped trying to make sense of it. I just make money from the contradiction."

Mercy, 24, Dimapur, Nagaland

The psychic cost of inhabiting this contradiction is severe. Fourteen of nineteen participants described symptoms consistent with dissociative experiences, a sense of splitting between the 'work self' and the 'real self' that extended beyond the pragmatic compartmentalisation common among sex workers globally (Sanders, 2005). What is distinctive here is that the dissociation is racial: it is not merely 'me at work' versus 'me at home' but 'the version of my race they desire' versus 'the version of my race I live.'

"When I'm with a client I become... empty. Not sad, not happy. Empty. Like my face is a screen and they're watching their own movie on it. I'm behind the screen. Sometimes after, when they leave, it takes me an hour to come back. I sit on the bed and I don't know who I am. Not dramatically. Literally. For a moment I genuinely don't know if I'm Hoihnu or the character I was playing. Then I shower, I eat, I call my mother, and I'm me again. Until next time."

Hoihnu, 25, Kangpokpi, Manipur

This resonates with Du Bois's (1903) double consciousness, the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others', but with a material twist. Du Bois described a phenomenological condition; what we are documenting is a labour condition. The double consciousness is not simply experienced; it is performed for pay. It is the work itself. Skin capital can only be converted into economic capital through the sustained performance of self-as-other, and this performance exacts a dissociative toll that constitutes what we would describe, following Mbembe (2003), as a form of slow social death, not the annihilation of the body but the

gradual erosion of the self's coherence under the weight of its own commodification.

And yet, and this 'and yet' is essential, the women are not simply crushed by this structure. They navigate it with intelligence, calculation, and dark humour. They set prices, refuse clients, choose when to enter and exit the economy, invest their earnings in education and family. Several participants described their intimate labour in explicitly entrepreneurial terms:

"This is a business. My face is the product. My body is the factory. I am the CEO. I don't need a pimp; I don't need a manager. I have a phone, I have Telegram, I have a good moisturizer. That's my startup. Three years, I save enough to go home and open a cafe in Aizawl. That's the exit strategy. I'm not a victim. I'm an entrepreneur operating in a racist market. I didn't create the racism. I'm just... monetizing it."

Zovi, 26, Aizawl, Mizoram

To dismiss this as false consciousness would be analytically lazy. To celebrate it as uncomplicated empowerment would be politically naive. What is required is a framework that can hold both: the genuine agency of strategic calculation and the structural coercion of a racial economy that limits the options within which that agency operates. Skin capital names exactly this: a form of capital that is real, it produces real economic returns, and yet is extracted from a condition of racial subordination that the women did not choose and cannot, individually, dismantle.

8 Conclusion

We conclude with a theoretical provocation. If we take the concept of skin capital seriously, and if racial phenotype functions within this field as a convertible, deployable, and value-generating asset, then it must also be understood as a means of production. In classical Marxian terms, the means of production are the instruments through which labour produces value. In the economy we have described, the Northeastern woman's face, eyes, skin, bone structure, and hair constitute the instrument through which intimate labour generates economic value. She does not merely use her body to work; her racialised appearance itself becomes productive. The phenotype is not simply an attribute of the worker but a productive asset embedded within the labour process.

This proposition has significant theoretical implications. If phenotype functions as a means of production, then the women who possess it occupy a distinctive structural position. Unlike the classical proletariat, they possess the productive asset through which value is generated, yet unlike the bourgeoisie, this possession derives solely from racialisation. They are simultaneously owners and dispossessed. Their capital is inseparable from the stigma through which it acquires value. The same phenotype that creates economic opportunity also exposes them to discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion.

We argue that existing sociological vocabularies remain inadequate to fully explain this condition. Concepts such as sex work, racial discrimination, emotional labour, and bodily capital each illuminate part of the phenomenon, but none captures its entirety. Skin capital is therefore proposed as a preliminary conceptual framework to describe the point at which race becomes labour, labour becomes capital, and capital becomes a strategy of survival, rendering simple binaries of agency and coercion increasingly inadequate.

At the time of writing, the nineteen women we interviewed continue to negotiate these realities. Some remain in intimate labour, others have exited, but all continue to carry the racialised phenotype that is simultaneously their economic resource and social burden. It is within this contradiction that the analytical value of skin capital ultimately resides.

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